

# Executive Summary

## Autonomy and Accountability in Higher Education: Lessons from Ghana and Mexico

What can Malaysia learn from other countries about autonomy and accountability in Higher Education? There is much that is distinctive about every national context, perhaps especially the Malaysian one, but in the era of globalization tertiary sectors around the world face many similar challenges.

In this paper author Sean Matthews argues against dominant Western influences in higher education in Malaysia and challenges externally-conceived global rankings by universities and policymakers. Instead, he provides alternatives in evaluating performance through the examples of Ghana and Mexico - which offer many interesting points of comparison with Malaysia as developing and middle-income postcolonial nations with relevant and robust higher education sectors.

Both Ghana and Mexico have similar institutional arrangements in higher education in terms of:



- The devolution of state bureaucratic or administrative control to autonomous or independent statutory bodies.



- The recognition, support and empowerment of diverse stakeholders particularly academics themselves



- The development of innovative, inclusive and relevant models for institutional review and Quality Assurance.



- The promotion of alternatives to standardized or homogenized institutional structures



- Intense public debate and scrutiny on the higher education sector

In Ghana, the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and National Accreditation Board (NAB) have been pivotal in asserting the autonomy of governing bodies and increasing the range of stakeholders in higher education governance. Between the years 1987 to 1991, the University Rationalisation Committee (URC) put in place reforms that removed certain key functions away from direct political control. This was further strengthened with the establishment of the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and National Accreditation Board (NAB), independent bodies tasked primarily with regulating, monitoring and reporting on the sector as well as making recommendations on the disbursement of state funding. In the 2000s the NAB's role in quality assurance were further extended through legislation ensuring that each public institution had their own Internal Quality Assurance Units.

In the case of Mexico, although 75-90% of each public university's funding comes from the government, the state has no significant influence on university governance. The state is not the dominant force in determining policies in the higher education sector; instead policies are formed through consultations with several stakeholders. The author highlights two specific bodies which represent different collective interests within the sector:

#### **The Consejo Nacional de Ciencias y Tecnologia, or CONACYT (National Council for Science and Technology)**

- Delivers research and technology transfer
- Proposes national research strategy
- Accredited qualified and active researchers.
- Review postgraduate programmes
- Disburse research grants
- Register individual researchers on the basis of their work and qualifications

#### **The Asociacion Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educacion Superior de la Republica Mexicana or ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutes)**

- A network of some 180 public universities and a few private institutions
- Membership is a 'credible substitute for institutional accreditation'
- Main discussion partner for governmental policy makers
- Drives core tertiary agenda in relation to access, innovation, academic career progression, mobility, and funding

It is also to be noted here, that the CONACYT also successfully advocated for differential salary scale on behalf of research community.

Sean Matthews further argues that the metrics-based system on faculty hiring, promotion and tenure, funding, and institutional ranking could have unintended consequences. For example, researchers may spend more time applying for grants than gathering data, or there is greater incentive to maximise performance in an area that is subjected to the metric at the expense of others.

He cites the example of The Daniel Review of the University of Ghana which successfully broke the mould of the metrics-based system. The University of Ghana had allowed a team of highly critical external experts to make wide-ranging recommendations for improvements. This open process helped to enhance the legitimacy of this university and helped to restore public trust.

The paper also spotlights the role of Ghana's University for Development Studies (UDS) in safeguarding institutional autonomy and promoting development in an economically disadvantaged region. The Vice Chancellor is appointed by the University Council and not by the Head of State. The university's policies of local recruitment (40% of student places are reserved for candidates from a specific catchment area) and responsiveness to local labour market needs (ie., teaching) have far-reaching benefits to its region. Which is unlike the current practice in Malaysia where the Government determines university Vice Chancellor appointments and university intakes in public universities.

Although one size does not fit all, it is important to note that lessons learnt from the higher education systems of Ghana and Mexico are still relevant. The two countries have mainly been successful in empowering independent statutory bodies; empowering diverse stakeholders; adopting innovative models for institutional review and providing alternatives to the current global ranking scheme.



**Dr. Sean Matthews** was educated at the Nottingham High School, UK, then read English at the University of Cambridge, where he also gained his PhD, which traced the emergence of Cultural Studies from English Studies in the 1950s and 1960s. He was a Visiting Lecturer at Kyushu University, Japan, between 1995 and 1998, then Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1998 to 2000. Returning to the UK, he worked at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (2000-2002), and the University of East Anglia (2002-2005), before joining Nottingham as the Director of the D. H. Lawrence Research Centre.